A Woman's Perspective
An Analysis of Didactic Medieval Japanese Buddhist Stories and Their Influence on Women

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Abstract

This paper explores Buddhist didactic texts from the medieval period of Japan and explains how these texts used portrayals of women as a way to influence and assert control over the choices of women. Its main arguments are that, first, Buddhist principles helped shape the negative representations of women's sexuality. Secondly, these negative portrayals of women's sexuality were intended to inspire fear and warn of the dangers of desire in women. Third, positive images of women exist, but portray women as asexual and spiritually pure to serve as models to emulate. These three things served to provide social control and helped create Japanese patriarchy.

Introduction

Buddhist didactic stories were a prevalent form of literature throughout the *Kamakura* (1185-1333) and *Muromachi* (1336-1573) periods, also referred to as the medieval era in Japan. This genre was meant to spread the message of Buddhism and encourage certain behaviors in the populace by using stories with religious messages and themes. These didactic texts permeate many literary genres including oral and written folk tales, illustrated scrolls, theatrical productions, such as *noh* and *bunraku*, and more. It has been noted by current scholars that such texts often represent women's sexuality, desires and emotions as corruptive forces capable of great destruction, likely contrived from the Buddhist ideal of detachment as a step towards enlightenment

combined with misogynistic influences from Confucianism and Shinto. It is often assumed that this representation of female desire was a message intended to teach monks and priests the dangers of attachment formed by sexual and romantic acts, and the hindrance it would pose to their spiritual salvation. This view is widely supported and makes sense given the significant difference between male and female autonomy in matters of love and marriage during this time period. I find it significant to note, however, that the same portrayal is rarely given to the desire of males, which suggests that this is only part of the intended message. Although little is known about the audience of these texts, either intended or actual, scholars often rush to point to the ways in which men would have viewed and reacted to these stories, neglecting to mention the impact on their female counterparts. Although I agree that Buddhist didactic stories were meant to influence the choices of men, I assert that they were also used to influence the beliefs of women in an attempt to modify their behavior and further enforce the idea of male superiority.

In an attempt to prove that women were also an intended audience to these texts, I will examine in detail several literary works from the medieval period in combination with further analysis of the work of current scholars of Japanese literature, history and culture, which will be broken into three sections. The first section will deal with the history and significance of Buddhism in medieval Japan and the way in which gender determined the expectations and opportunities of people in both the physical and spiritual worlds. In the second section, I will examine and compare several texts which portray women's sexuality and attempt to prove how they were intended to be viewed by women as warnings in an attempt to control them through fear. The final section will examine texts which feature "exemplary women," and attempt to show how these characters were often asexual and obedient to serve as role models for women to emulate. Through this I will show how Buddhist didactic texts used the portrayal of women and femininity to serve as models of appropriate and inappropriate behavior in an attempt to influence their choices.

Historical Background

Although originating in India, Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the middle of the sixth century by way of China and the Paekche Kingdom in present day Korea. Buddhism primarily addressed the teachings of the first Buddha, Gautama (6th century B.C.E.) and his Four Noble Truths which taught that:

> (1) the world is a place of suffering; (2) suffering is caused by human desires and acquisitiveness; (3) something can be done to end suffering; and (4) the end of suffering and achievement of enlightenment or buddhahood lies in following a prescribed program known as the

> Eightfold Noble Path (right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.) [1]

As Barbara Ruch, author of Engendering Faith explains:

> Although the Buddha was a foreign deity and Buddhism a foreign religion, it represented to the Japanese a summation of the most advanced and superior aspects of known cultures, both intellectually and technologically. Japanese rulers instituted many administrative systems for the support and management of Buddhism, including clearly established demarcations between the clergy and the secular population.[2]

In its early years of reform, Prince Shōtoku (574-622,) in his Seventeen-Article Constitution of 604, insisted upon the relevance of Buddhism among the Japanese. The ideas of Buddhism appealed to the Japanese people for various reasons; however, it is likely that the Japanese people probably accepted the validity of Buddhism due to "its most fundamental premises that all things are impermanent, suffering is universal, and man is the helpless victim of his fate,"[3] which were ideas that seemed to speak to the experiences of the Japanese people.

In the eighth century, Emperor Shōmu (701-756), renowned for being a devout Buddhist follower, enacted the *ritsu-ryō* system of government in which "state Buddhism was charged with maintaining the security and peace of the nation."[4] This policy of state-sponsored Buddhism lead way to the zenith of the creation of branch temples and nunneries, including the founding of a national Buddhist center, *Tōdaiji* Temple, in the capital of Nara. However, the propagation of Buddhism was not desired by all. Many courtiers resented the favor bestowed on Buddhism and the influence Buddhist priests had on state affairs, providing motivation for the capital to be moved to the newly constructed city of Kyoto in 794. This ultimately lead to a clearer definition of church and state as "after the move to Kyoto, the court attempted to encourage the activities of Buddhist prelates who would devote their attention to spiritual rather than worldly matters."[5] At the same time, Confucian values had begun to permeate into Buddhist thoughts and practices in Japan.[6] Reports of sexual

1 Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture. 14th ed.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 20.
2 Barbara Ruch, *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Pre-Modern Japan.* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies The University of Michigan, 2002), xxviii.
3 Varley, 21.
4 Ruch, 131.
5 Varley, 49.
6 Ruch, 132.

misconduct resulted in edicts supported by Confucian values which intended to restrict the contact between monks and nuns at all monasteries, and further established the authority of monks over nuns as well as contributing to the negative portrayal of women in Buddhist literature. Combined with the already existing stigmatization of women as impure due to their menstruation, they came to be viewed as hindrances to enlightenment, resulting in fewer roles for them to fill in religious ceremonies and thus fewer women became full-fledged nuns towards the end of the medieval period.[7]

Despite the efforts of the court, Buddhism continued to thrive into the *Kamakura* period (1185 – 1333) with the emergence of several new sects. The priest Hōnen (1133-1212) founded the sect of Pure Land Buddhism which, rather than focusing on enlightenment through individual acts, "stress[ed] utter reliance upon faith in Amida [Buddha] as the only one able to save men[.]"[8] Pure Land Buddhism became popular among the peasantry and spread to all corners of Japan, likely a direct consequence of the tumultuous state of the country. James Dobbins, author of *Letters of the Nun Eshinni,* concludes "the success of Pure Land Buddhism in medieval Japan was based in part on its appeal to people in ordinary circumstances. It was a religion well suited to those who felt incapable of saving themselves."[9] It also held appeal to women, as it embraced the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, which differed from traditional Buddhist scripture in that it allowed even women and children to possess the Buddha nature and thus attain enlightenment.[10] This is not to say that women were viewed as equals in Pure Land, as its "overtures to women were predicated for the most part on the condescending views it shared with other types of Buddhism. Hence, the religious path it laid out was certain to make women feel inferior and to impose requirements on them that it did not on men." [11]

Unfortunately, little is known about the actual daily lives of medieval nuns and religious women. Only a few documentations exist, such as the collection of letters written by the nun Eshinni (1182-1268), making it hard to extrapolate their personal experiences to medieval women as a whole. In theory, rules existed prescribing the lives of nuns; however, how closely they were followed is up to debate. Dobbin's explains:

From the standpoint of orthodox Buddhism, there was a fairly detailed understanding of a nun's status and lifestyle. What made one a full-fledged nun,

7 Barbara R. Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions.* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 87.

8 Varley, 96.

9 James C. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 59.

10 Ibid., 96.

11 Ibid., 93.

or *bikuni,* was a set of ordination procedures that included donning robes; tonsure, or shaving the head; and having a set of 348 vows administered before a formally convened assembly of ten full-fledged priests and ten full-fledged nuns[...] Subsequently, the life of the nun was to be spent in complete devotion to religious practices, ideally in a *amadera* (nunery.) [...] The Buddhist ideal of the nun described here was never fully actualized in Japan. It was an imported model without widespread appeal.[...] Consequently, only a miniscule number of women were fully ordained and cloistered in nunneries. But there were many who lived peripatetic lives as nun preachers, popularizers, and entertainers. And there were untold numbers who took up a nun's life in their own homes, reorganizing their activities around religious concerns.[12]

Despite the decline of fully certified nuns, becoming a nun was a still a commonplace stage of life for most medieval women, regardless of class as suggested by tales such as *Heike monogatari* (the tales of Heike), which portray the former empress Kenreimon'in's (1155-1213) withdrawl to the *Jakkōin* hermitage after the death of her son.[13] A woman who did not marry, or one who was left a widow was generally expected to take tonsure and become a lay nun, taking the vows and living a religious life while remaining a part of secular society. Likewise, many women who faced illness or disease would take vows in order to prepare themselves spiritually for the end of life. This commonality in the lives of medieval women can be found in literary and artistic portrayals, for example, "[v]irtually all elderly women appearing in medieval scroll paintings (*emakimono)* are depicted in nun's attire." [14]

The cutting of one's hair was especially significant to medieval women. Aristocratic women would grow out their hair, sometimes remaining uncut from birth as a sign of their status, so to shave one's head was likely viewed as an irrevocable act and a sign of dedication to one's faith. The act of shaving the head also better enabled them to separate themselves from being viewed as sexual objects, and allowed them to focus on a life free from vanity. As Dobbins states, "it also imbued them with a certain degree of sexual indeterminacy, for they could be mistaken for priests who also shaved their heads. Thus, the removal of hair in nunhood, whether carried out by the male-dominated Buddhist establishment or performed voluntarily by individual women, signified their withdrawal from the world of sexuality." [15]

Along with a lack of documentation of the lives of religious Japanese women, we lack evidence of the female view of Buddhist texts. Although scholars have analyzed many of the so-called didactic texts, most have

12 Dobbins, 83-84.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 82.
15 Dobbins, 86.

interpreted them through the eyes of men, neglecting to contemplate their meaning and interpretation to a female audience. The current scholarship also lacks to acknowledge that women may have been an intended audience to the author of these texts and so ignore their influence on a Japanese patriarchy. In the next two sections, I intend to look at several didactic Buddhist texts in detail, and attempt to explain their significance to a female audience, as well as explain why these messages would have been beneficial to establishing and maintaining a patriarchal Japan.

The Corruptive Forces of Female Sexuality and Desire

Within medieval Japanese literature, the portrayal of love, lust, and jealousy as a corruptive force are repeated extensively in stories such as *Dōjōji monogatari (The Tale of Dōjōji,), Shichinin bikuni (The Seven Nuns,) Kanawa (Iron Trivet),* and *Akimichi* . Women who are controlled by their emotions often are portrayed as supernatural creatures capable of immense power. Common transformations of women include *oni*, dragons, and snakes, which may be explained by the fact that "[s]erpents are also associated with the baser emotions of lust and rage, and folklore contains numerous examples of women transformed into serpentine creatures by hatred, desire, or jealousy[...]" [1]

One example of this transformation is in the *The Tale of Dōjōji,* in which we are shown a lustful woman whose emotions transform her into a giant serpent, although the way in which this occurs varies in different versions of the tale. Although the tale is based on ancient rain invoking rituals,[2] the earliest records of the tale first appeared in 1040 with subsequent variations appearing over the next several hundred years.[3] In the most detailed version titled *A Monk of Dōjōji Temple in Kii Province Brings Salvation to Two Snakes by Copying the Lotus Sutra,*[4] two dutiful and respectable monks (one old, the other young and attractive) are on a pilgrimage to Kumano Shrine, a famous pilgrimage location, when they stop to rest at the local residence of a widowed woman. She finds the younger monk attractive and waits until he is asleep to sneak into his bed and unsuccessfully attempts to woo him. He rejects her saying that he is a holy man, and it would be a grave sin for them both, yet this does not dissuade her. She continues to entice and plead with him until

1 Virgina Skord, *Tales of Tears and Laughter: Short Fiction of Medieval Japan.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 129.

2 Ibid.

3 Virginia Skord Waters, "Sex, Lies, and the Illustrated Scroll: The Dōjōji Engi Emaki." *Monumenta Nipponica*, 52, no. 1: (1997), 60.

4 Naoshi Koriyama, Bruce Allen, and Karen Thornber. *Japanese Tales from Times Past : Stories of Fantasy and Folklore from the Konjaku Monogatari Shu,* (Rutland: Tuttle Publishing, 2015.) 55-58.

morning when finally, in a moment of pity, he tells her that he will continue his journey to Kumano, but vows he will return to be her husband when the journey is through. This is enough to placate her, and the two monks continue their journey. The widow waits for the young monk to return, but he does not. After some time, she inquires about him to another traveling monk, and is told that a monk fitting his description passed by several days earlier on a different route. Realizing the monk has betrayed her, she becomes enraged and retreats home, locking herself in her room until she dies, presumably from love sickness. Death is not enough to assuage her feelings, however, and from her room emerges a forty-foot-long snake that begins to hunt down the two monks. The snake chases the monks to Dōjōji, where the resident monks of the temple attempt to hide the young monk by lowering a large bell and having him hide inside. The snake is relentless, and breaks down the doors of the temple, wraps itself around the bell, cries tears of blood, and finally burst into flames, killing the young monk inside before slithering away.

Sometime later, an elderly, high ranking monk of the temple has a dream in which an even larger snake comes to him and tells him that he is the young monk who died. He says that the woman's evil intentions turned him into his current form and that he is trapped and suffering as her husband. He begs the elderly monk to copy the *Lotus Sutra* and dedicate it to him so that he might be freed. The monk does this, and indeed, the young monk and the woman come to him in another dream and thank him, telling him that due to his good deed, they were both set free from their snake forms and were able to ascend to heaven.

Although there are many variations to this story, the message behind all of them are the same; a woman's lust is something to be feared. From the beginning, the widow is portrayed as a conniving and indecent person, even before she takes on her fearsome serpent form. Just the fact that she is a widow eagerly seeking a new husband maybe meant to show the reader that she is not an upstanding woman. To quote Meeks, "medieval Japanese literature commonly intimates that society expected a widow to take religious vows, usually within the first forty-nine days of her husband s death, and to devote the remainder of her life to prayers for his salvation."[5] Furthermore, she does not confront the monk about her feelings on equal terms, but waits until he is sleeping and vulnerable. She throws herself into his bed and clings to him through the night attempting to seduce him despite his protests. Readers are encouraged to believe that the monk is an innocent victim, and even his broken promise is assumed to be a justified attempt to escape an evil woman.[6]

5 Lori Meeks, "Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Life Cycle: Understanding Nunhood in Heian and Kamakura Japan." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies,* 70, no. 1: (2010), 2.

6 Waters, 64.

It is likely that due to the vast number of variations of this story, different versions may have been attempting to appeal to different audiences. Susan Blakeley Klein, author of *When the Moon Strikes the Bell: Desire and Enlightenment in the Noh Play Dōjōji,* concludes that "the Dōjōji story was used as a cautionary tale meant to keep young monks and *yamabushi* mountain priests in line by warning them of the horrible dangers awaiting them if they gave in to the ever-present temptations inherent in daily contact with women."[7] Klein's main argument is that women were viewed as being unable to control their passions, and because of this were seen as little more than sexual temptations and obstacles to achieving spiritual enlightenment. Klein's argument is supported by text from the illustrated scroll version of the story, *Dōjōji Engi Emaki,* in which the narration states:

> [...]there is no woman, high or humble, who is a stranger to jealousy. I could not begin to relate all the examples past and present. Even in the sutras, it is said that women are servants of hell, blocking the path to enlightenment. They are like bodhisattvas on the outside and demons on the inside.[8]

This view of women as being hindrances to men's salvation inevitably resulted in "unconscious fears of women as uncontrollably powerful, to create the phallic serpent-woman of the *Dōjōji setsuwa*."[9] Although I agree with Klein's assertions that this story intends to caution the reader, as well as drawing upon fears of female sexuality to create a supernatural element, I would argue that it not only makes an appeal for holy men to avoid women, but also serves as warning to women about the dangers of their own sexuality in an attempt to modify their behavior. If one is to assume the tale to be true, I imagine that from a woman reader's point of view the message would be that embracing their sexuality and expressing desire would ultimately harm them in this life and the next, and possibly even harm the object of their desire. Of course this may persuade monks to maintain their distance from women and other would-be lovers, but the monk in the *Dōjōji* tale does his best to avoid the wild passions of the woman. If the message was intended solely for them, why would it seem to be saying that even a chance encounter could ruin the spiritual salvation of a good person? On the other hand, the narration in the *Dojoji Engi Emaki* also professes "I have heard of no precedent for a woman instantaneously turning into a serpent. But then again, this woman was no ordinary person. The effect of her deep passion was to teach wild and unruly people to reflect."[10] This seems to suggest that the message is for those who are consumed by desire,

7 Susan Blakeley Klein, "When the Moon Strikes the Bell: Desire and Enlightenment in the Noh Play Dōjōji." *Journal of Japanese Studies,* 17, no. 2: (1991), 300.

8 Waters, 80.

9 Klein, 304.

10 Waters, 81.

and as the text previously mentioned, this is a quality associated with women. Furthermore it implies that the woman's transformation was not simply a punishment for her actions, but a lesson for others to learn from. By giving into her desires, the woman in the story faces a sorry fate. Not only does her desire cause her and her would-be-lover to lose their lives, even their spirits cannot find rest in the afterlife, as they are transformed into monstrous beasts and being tormented in a hell where they can never enter buddhahood. The texts seem to suggest that a woman who is ruled by her emotions is one who is dangerous to herself as well as others, and the supernatural element serves to enhance this fear as well as suggest that the only solace for both parties is to turn to the Buddhist scripture. This is echoed by Waters when she says "The monk and woman, pursued and pursuer, executed and executioner, represent a mutually forged unit, dissolved only through salvation secured by the power of Buddhism."[11]

The *Dōjōji* tale is seen repeatedly in various versions and genres including *setsuwa* folktales, *kabuki* theater, *noh* theater, and illustrated scrolls. Perhaps, as Waters says, this is because "[i]n medieval times, sexual license or adultery was believed to incur karmic retribution in the form of rebirth as a snake,"[12] However, whether the prevalence of the stories was the cause or a symptom of this belief is unknown. We do know, however, that the *Dōjōji* tale is not the only example of serpent transformation in didactic stories from medieval Japan.

In the *otogizōshi* (illustrated short story) *Akimichi,* the man Akimichi plans to get revenge on the man who killed his father by having his wife pretend to be a courtesan and seduce him, giving him the chance to get close enough to exact his vengeance. His wife is horrified and says:

> There's never been such a scheme. I've never heard of anything like this! How can you suggest such a thing? This is unbelievable! Even if I am not to be permitted to see you again unless I do as you bid me, I wouldn't even think of doing that.[...] In the next [life] I am destined to be reborn as a snake. If I touch the flesh of two men, surely I will be tortured with iron stakes, three feet long, run through my mouth and vital organs. What you suggest is unthinkable.[13]

The wife's horrified reaction seems to support the theory that the portrayal of women's sexuality as evil and transformative were not meant to influence men alone. Through Akimichi's wife we gain a valuable look at the way transformation stories may have been internalized by women. Although it

11 Waters, 73.

12 Ibid.

13 Margaret H. Childs, "Didacticism in Medieval Short Stories:Hatsuse Monogatari and Akimichi." *Monumenta Nipponica, 42, no. 3: (1987), 271.*

gives us little evidence to the way in which actual women of medieval Japan would have internalized the message of these stories, through the portrayal of these women we can see the way in which the story was intended to influence the female reader. One thing that seems significant about the *Akimichi* tale is that even though the desire is not her own and she is being given a command by her husband, the fear that an illicit relationship outside of the bonds of marriage will cause a transformation into a serpent is still her primary reason for refusal, insinuating that these fears run so deep, she is even willing to disobey her husband to avoid such a fate. In essence, tales such as the *Dōjōji* one are at least portrayed to have a deep psychological effect on women.

Another message that transformation stories seem to be implying to the female reader is that although jealousy and desire are inescapable downfalls of being a woman, there can be salvation in following the way of Buddha. Despite the relatively positive message that there is hope in turning to Buddhism, it is relevant to note that this "power to save" seems to come not from the woman herself, but from the faith of the "spiritually superior" man. Looking back at the *Dōjōji* tale, although both the young monk and the women ascend to heaven in the end, had it not been for the upstanding spiritual character of the two monks, the woman's soul would surely have been lost. This seems to suggest that the power of a woman's sexuality is viewed so strong it cannot be overcome on one's own.

This message is repeated in the fifth nun's story in the tale of *The Seven Nuns.* In *The Seven Nuns,* each of the women take turns telling the story of how they became nuns with commentary in between each. When the fifth nun tells her story we learn that she had been previously married to a lord named *Kikui no Ukon,* who one day upon returning from the capital on business, brings with him a beautiful mistress. At first she tries to be a dutiful wife and look the other way of her husband's affair, but he soon starts to visit his mistress more and more and brushes his wife aside, causing her intense jealousy. She slowly starts to transform into a dragon and all but one of her attendants flee in fear. The remaining attendant suggests she visit with a skilled Buddhist ascetic, but she refuses in a blind rage exclaiming:

> I'll do no such thing! I'm not going to listen to a word about Buddhas or Buddhist doctrine. All I want is to turn this place into a swamp and cover it with black clouds. I'll spout flames like those of the Red Lotus and Deep Red Lotus hells and drive that hateful woman away from my husband. If I could just swallow her up in a gulp, I'd be satisfied. After that my husband and I will live together in the Three Evil Realms and wreak havoc for the rest of eternity. I want only to become a great villain.[14]

14 Margaret H. Childs. *Rethinking Sorrow,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991.) 117.

It is clear that she has no desire to reform her wicked ways on her own. Despite her initial refusal, she agrees to meet with him only so that she may ask him how she can kill her husband's mistress. The ascetic tells her to think of nothing and "let no thoughts arise. Forget good and bad,"[15] and that this will destroy her enemy in time. She did as he said for fourteen days, but felt it had no effect. When she confronted him on the matter, the ascetic asks her what became of the women she hated, and she realizes that all the meditation has caused her to not even think about the lovers (effectively making them "disappear") and that her body has returned to normal. She suddenly realizes the wisdom of the man and his teachings and becomes his disciple.

Like the tale of *Dōjōji*, the story of the fifth nun features a woman who is completely consumed by her unrequited desires. Her rampant jealousy transforms her physical body as well as her mind, leaving her wanting the destruction not only of her husband's lover, but of all the world. She is so overcome by her emotions that even when presented with the option to turn to Buddha herself, she cannot think of anything but her vengeance. Once again we see that it is only due to the ascetic and his clever ruse combined with the ability of Buddha's teaching to overcome the supernatural that the woman and her soul are saved. One might argue that the fifth nun in essence saves herself through her meditation; however, I think it is important to note that she was an unwitting participant in the event, and that without the intervention of the wise holy man she would have been doomed to become a fearsome monster. Klein asserts that Buddhist portrayals of gender are "[...]implicitly dualistic: the feminine is associated with uncontrollable nature, sexuality, the profane world, and pollution; the masculine is associated with culture, asexuality, the spiritual realm, and purity."[16] I contend that this portrayal was intended to impress upon women that their fate, while still dependent on their own beliefs and actions, ultimately lay with the spiritual authority of men.

Where I find Klein's assertion falls flat is that not all portrayals of women are intrinsically negative. Taking a deeper look at *The Seven Nuns*, we are shown several example of highly spiritual and morally upstanding women who seem to exert Klein's ideals of "masculinity" by being spiritual, pure, and non-sexual. This reversal of gender ideals seems contradictory to the portrayals shown this far. However, I assert that these portrayals as well ultimately served to further the patriarchal system.

15 Ibid.
16 Klein, 304.

The De-sexualization of the Exemplary Woman

For modern American women, assigning masculine ideas or roles to women is often seen as empowering. Iconic portrayals such as Rosie the Riveter have become feminist icons inspiring women to break into "the world of men." However, it was not quite as straightforward in medieval Japan. Buddhist ideas likely contributed to the way these portrayals would have been viewed to a medieval Japanese audience that is distinctly different than our modern western view. For example, the belief in the the *five hindrances* or *five obstacles*, which was a term that referred to Buddhist ideas passed down from India and China, state that women are incapable of achieving the five highest forms of rebirth and thus, were incapable of progressing beyond a human form in their current lifetime. It was often used as justification to support the superiority of men over women. According to this way of thought, a woman's only chance at achieving Buddhahood required her to live a life filled with enough good karma to allow her to be reborn as a man in the next. Therefore, gender-transient portrayals of women assuming the qualities of men would likely have been viewed as a type of *henjō nanji (*transformation into male)[17] and a sign of spiritual transcendence rather than a social statement regarding women's status and/or their intrinsic nature. The story of *The Seven Nuns* opens with a passage that remarks on this concept while introducing *Ko Amida Butsu,* the nun proprietress of the inn in which the story takes place:

> When she quieted her heart and thought of the pain to come in the next life, she realized that above all other things we should lament our transmigrations in the cycle of life and death, that we should strive with all our might to break free of this cycle. 'I would like to sow the seeds of my enlightenment,' she thought, 'but, I must have been stingy in some previous life. That is why I am a poor woman in this life. The best I can do is to find a place where firewood is available and heat water for baths for the rich and poor so they can wash away the grime of their worldly passions. This will be the seed of my enlightenment.'[18]

This passage highlights the feeling of inferiority of being female, and that emulating the positive masculine qualities would have been the only route for a woman desiring spiritual advancement. She must discard her femininity and transcend her gender in order to pursue enlightenment. This is not to imply that aspiring towards a religious life could not be empowering for medieval women. Dobbins asserts "Nunhood had profound social ramifications for medieval women. Specifically, it exempted them from various roles and duties

17 Dobbins, 96.

18 Childs, *Rethinking Sorrow,* 91-92.

prescribed by society, especially the roles of wife, lover, and mother. Becoming a nun was one of the few publicly sanctioned options woman had outside these roles,"[19] and thus, would likely have served to empower women into feeling more autonomy over the direction of their domestic lives. I attest, however, that any feeling of empowerment women may have found in nunhood was primarily superficial.

A woman could have taken tonsure as an attempt at some sort of independence, but she would have been unlikely to find it in reality. The *eight rules of reverence* required women to take a subordinate role to men even outside of secular family life. Ruch explains: " in essence, the eight conditions, which are said to have been set down at the time of [the first woman's] entrance into the clergy and are variously known as the eight rules of reverence, the eight cardinal rules, and the eight rules concerning respect for teachers, required nuns to be obedient to monks,"[20] and included rules such as "a nun, even if a hundred years have passed since she received the precepts, shall greet a monk ordained that very day with deference, rise up from her seat, salute him with joined hands, and show him respect," and "a nun may not admonish a monk from this day forward [the day of the founding of the nuns' order], but a monk may admonish a nun."

Given that state Buddhism was responsible for maintaining peace, it should come to no surprise that one way to curtail the threat of social upheaval presented by unmarried, widowed, or otherwise "independent women" would be to encourage them to join a religious system that would ensure female subordination. Looking back at *The Seven Nuns*, we can see how their various stories might have been intended to educate women in those situations. Since I covered the story of the fifth nun in section two, and the final two stories focus on the consequences of improper behavior, for the sake of brevity I will focus on only the first four stories here.

The first three stories in *The Seven Nuns* revolve around women who have faced loss. Tragic loss is a theme common in Buddhist literature which preaches the impermanence and sadness of life. The first nun lost her home due to war and became a prostitute in order to survive. She and her male client fall in love, but being a prostitute, she is forced to take on other clients when her lover leaves the capital and returns to his home province. Her new client falls in love with her as well, but when he learns of the other lover, he sends her away out of respect for the other man saying it would not be right for him to love a woman who is loved by another, and requests that she find and return to her original lover. Upon his request she returns to her original lover, but he too turns her away in respect for the other man's feelings. Rejected by both her loves and left with no one to support her, she becomes a nun and

19 Dobbins, 83.
20 Ruch, 283-284.

prays for the souls of her admirable lovers. The second nun suffers the loss of her family after she loses her son in a tragic accident, and her husband kills himself to assuage his guilt. At first she thinks to follow her family in death, but is stopped by a passerby who persuades her to become a nun to pray for her family's salvation. The third nun, too, suffers the loss of her husband, whom she loves dearly, when he dies valiantly in battle, and she becomes a nun to pray for him. As Childs points out, "the first three revelatory experiences are the result of circumstances that are not malevolent. The behavior of the characters whose actions cause these three women to take the tonsure is blameless. On the contrary, it is more or less admirable."[21] I agree that these stories highlight characters who act admirably, which emphasize the inevitability of tragedy, but I also believe that from a woman's perspective these stories would be viewed as examples to follow should tragedy strike them as well. Even the prostitute, who one might assume due to the nature of her job would make her viewed as a temptress and a victim to her jealous nature, is instead portrayed as a humble, loyal, and dutiful woman who does as her lovers' wish of her with no expression of her own sexuality or consideration for her own desires. *Ko Amida Butsu* even comments on this in the tale, remarking that it would have been natural for her to think:

> '[...]What kind of love is this? If this is what you think of me, I should have stayed in the east. A woman's lot is burning resentment and endless regret.' But that never occurred to you. Since it is a rare thing even in a hundred generations, your wisdom in taking this as the seed of enlightenment and becoming a nun is a wonderful thing.[22]

The variety of circumstances and the way these women are idealized would seem to have little impact on the male reader and suggests they were intended as role models for women.

The story of the fourth nun is different in that, as she states, "unlike all the other stories, mine is not a tale of woe."[23] She also seems to portray a more independent woman who I assert was meant to influence women who did not want the traditional married life. Innately spiritual and desiring to follow the ways of Buddha in earnest, she begs her husband to let her become a nun, but he refuses. She continues to be a loving and dutiful wife, but does not give up on her wish to seek enlightenment. One night when her husband tries to make love to her, she places a human skull she had found in his hand and tries to convince him that due to the impermanence of life, she too is nothing but a skeleton in hopes that he will see her desire to achieve salvation and allow her to seek enlightenment. Although he worries about her conviction, eventually he is convinced, and they both decide to give up secular life to pursue one of

21 Childs, *Rethinking Sorrow, 162.*
22 Ibid., 99.
23 Ibid., 106.

asceticism. In Childs' analysis of *The Seven Nuns,* she ignores any significance of the fourth nun's story saying it serves only to be a transitional piece between "tales that depict unfortunate circumstances causing grievous results," and "stories which present the tragic consequences of condemnable behavior."[24] Due to her strong religious convictions and the shocking way in which she makes her point to her husband, I feel it would be remiss to deny her story any significance. Unlike the previous women, the fourth nun had no desire to be a wife and mother. However, despite her unwavering religious calling, she remains a dutiful wife until she can convince her husband of her resolve. Even during the shocking scene where she makes her case to her husband, she presents her argument in a way which showcases her wisdom and knowledge of scripture and poetry, citing verses such as:

> Skin-deep is the difference
>
> Between men and women.
>
> As skeletons we are all the same.[25]

Even comparing herself to the decomposed head is an allusion to the practice of "contemplating the impure conditions of the female body, particularly the decaying female body, [which] was used by male monastics to conquer their carnal urges."[26] This too shows how an exemplary religious woman is one who is able to completely put aside her sexuality and transcend her femininity to embody masculine ideals, and in doing so, she brings about salvation to herself as well as her formerly non-believing husband. From a male perspective, this story, as Child's suggests, may have little meaning, but when analyzed from a female perspective it seems to have significant relevance.

Conclusion

Given the lack of physical evidence, it is difficult to say with any certainty who Buddhist didactic stories were meant to influence or how they might have been interpreted by various readers. Negative portrayals of women, particularly in relation to sexuality and desire were influenced by Buddhism's view of relationships and attachments as being a hindrance to spiritual enlightenment, and were likely intended to create fear in their audience as a way to further Buddhist ideals while maintaining social order. Unfortunately, little has been done to explore these texts in regards to the gender of the readership. To ignore how women perceived these representations would be to ignore their significance to half the population. Representations of the evils of femininity further solidified the idea of male superiority, and portrayals of

24 Ibid., *163.*
25 Ibid.
26 Barbara Ambros, "A Rite of Their Own: Japanese Buddhist Nuns and the Anan Kōshiki." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, 43, no. 1: 2016.*

women in other literary works tend to suggest that women likely took these messages to heart. Furthermore, stories such as *The Seven Nuns* seems to have little depth of meaning outside the obvious Buddhist themes of tragedy and loss to a male audience, but may be viewed with purpose to a female one, both inspiring women to turn to Buddhism to overcome their destructive nature while maintaining the established patriarchy by giving a sanctioned alternative for women who may have otherwise been exempt from male control in the secular world. Although we may never know how many women were truly influenced by these texts and in what ways, given what we know about medieval Japanese society and the portrayals presented in art and literature we can attempt to piece together the puzzle. More research is needed to fully understand the scope of this issue, but hopefully scholars can begin to illuminate this topic which has been overlooked until now.

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